PHILADELPHIA'S WASHINGTON SQUARE

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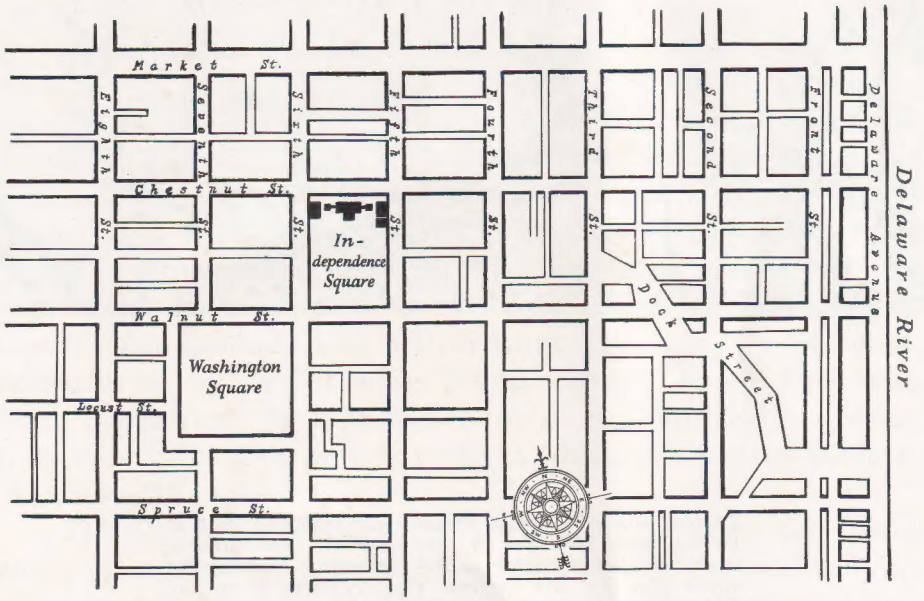
BY

CARROLL FREY



THE PENN MUTUAL LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
INDEPENDENCE SQUARE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

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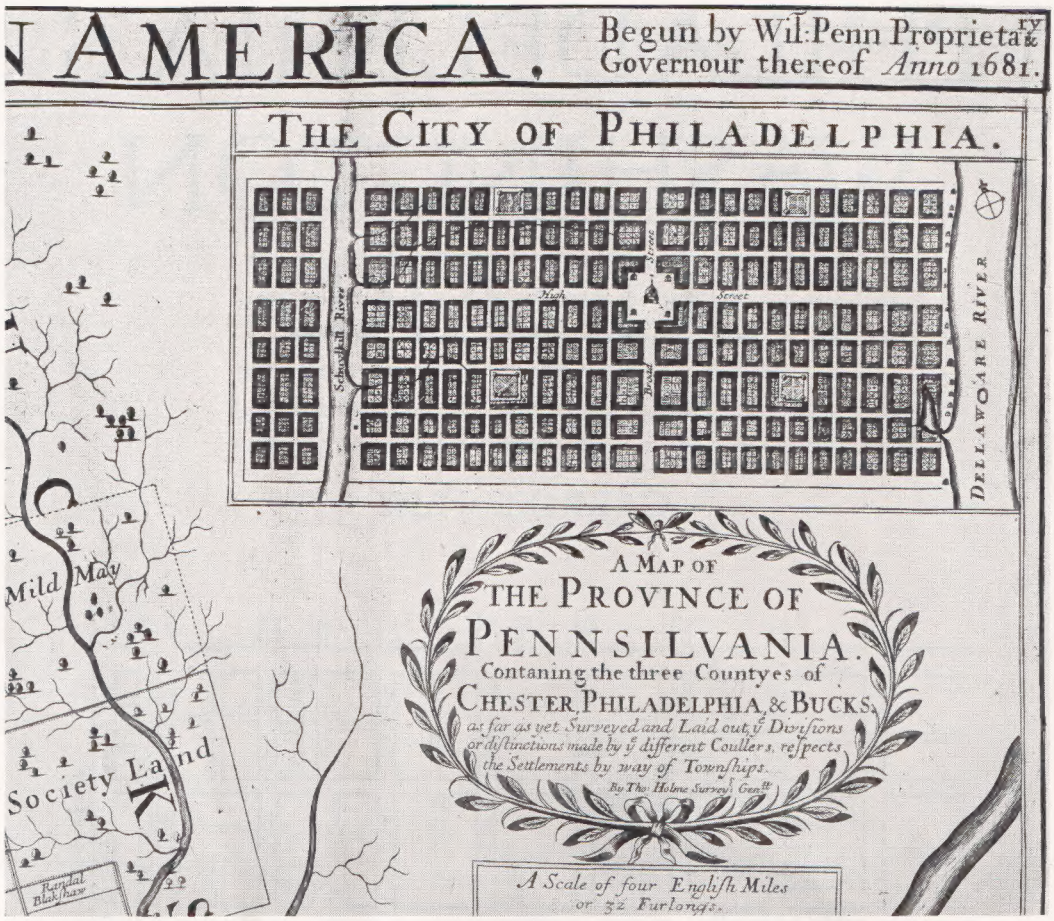


Thomas Holme's plot of Philadelphia from his map of Pennsylvania published in 1682 or 1683. The original in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It shows the street plan for the original City, reaching from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill and from Vine Street to South Street. The Center Square and the other four Squares appear on the plot.

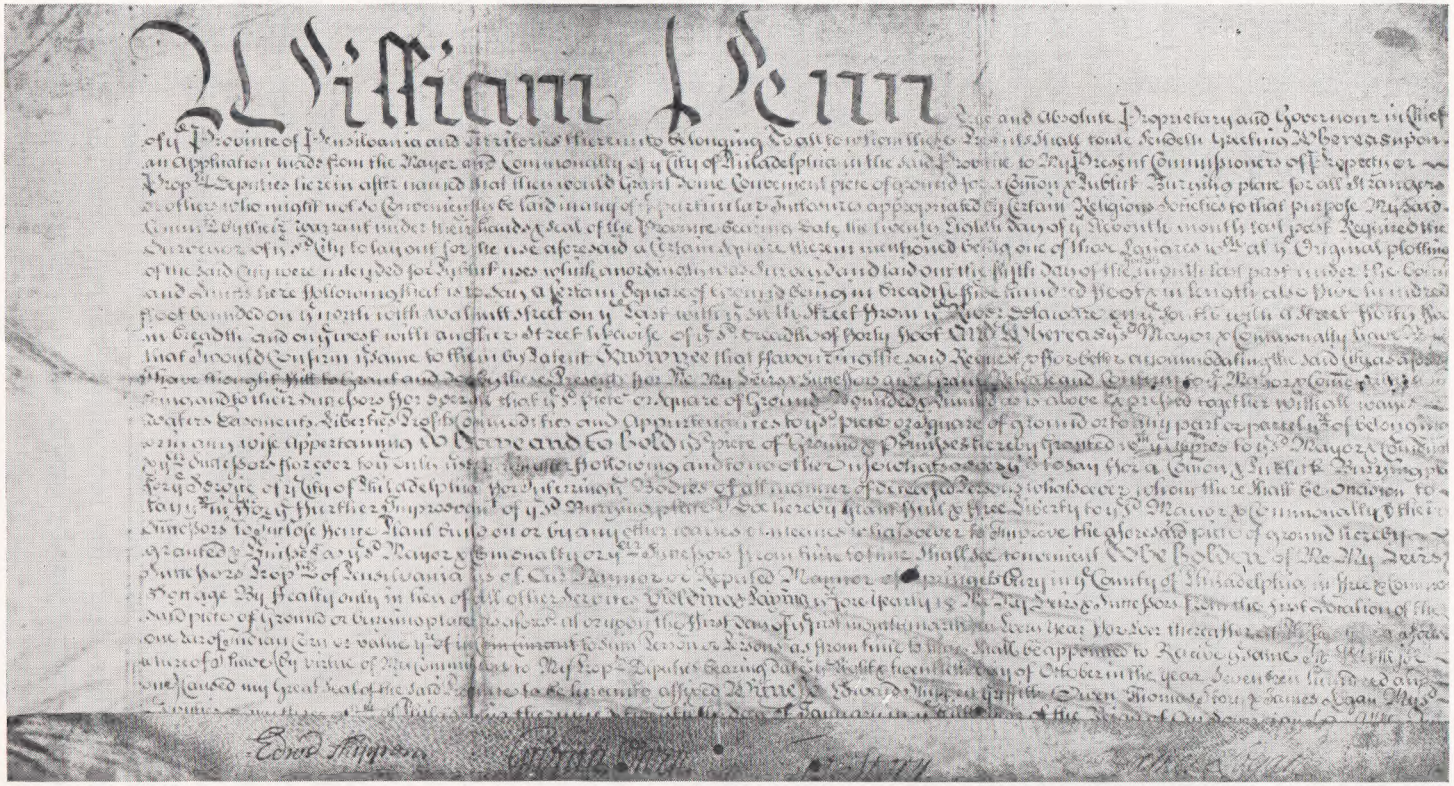
Philadelphia's Washington Square is as old as the City. It first appeared on a Holme map as a Square set apart for public uses. It was half a century old when George Washington was born, and it was half a century old when the State House was begun. So it was older than its corner-to-corner neighbor, Independence Square, which is so much more historically celebrated.

Thomas Holme, William Penn's Surveyor-General, on his 1682 or 1683 map of Philadelphia had marked off five Squares as dedicated by the Proprietor and Governor for the use of the public, four of these "for the like uses as the moor-fields in London." The Center Square, Northwest, Northeast, Southwest and Southeast Squares became known under those names for geographical reasons, complying with the Quaker avoidance of naming for persons. It was over a century later that the five Squares were named for Penn, Logan, Franklin, Rittenhouse and Washington.

No Land Deed had been necessary for the City to claim the use of the Squares as City property, but on "ye twentieth day of January in ye fifth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lady Anne, Queen of England, and ye six and twentieth of my government anno domini 1706" William Penn's four Commissioners of Property—Edward Shippen, Griffith Owen, Thomas Story and James Logan—executed and signed a Patent for the Southeast Square as a Potter's Field. The Patent speaks of "one of those Squares on the original plotting of the said City . . . intended for public uses" and refers to "a certain Square of ground, being in breadth five hundred foot and in length also five hundred foot, bounded on ye North with Walnut Street, on ye East with Sixth Street from ye river Delaware, on ye South with a street forty foot in breadth, and on ye West with another street likewise of ye breadth of forty foot."

The Patent was in answer to the City's request for "some convenient piece of ground for a comon and publick burying place for all strangers or others who might not so conveniently be laid in any of particular enclosures appropriated by certain religious societies for that purpose."

The City having obtained the use of the Square apparently had no further need for formalities to rent out the ground for pasture use. But it was by authority of the Patent that the ground



The Patent whereby William Penn's four commissioners authorized the use by the City of the Southeast Square as a burying ground for strangers, signed 1706. In the collection of the Penn Mutual.

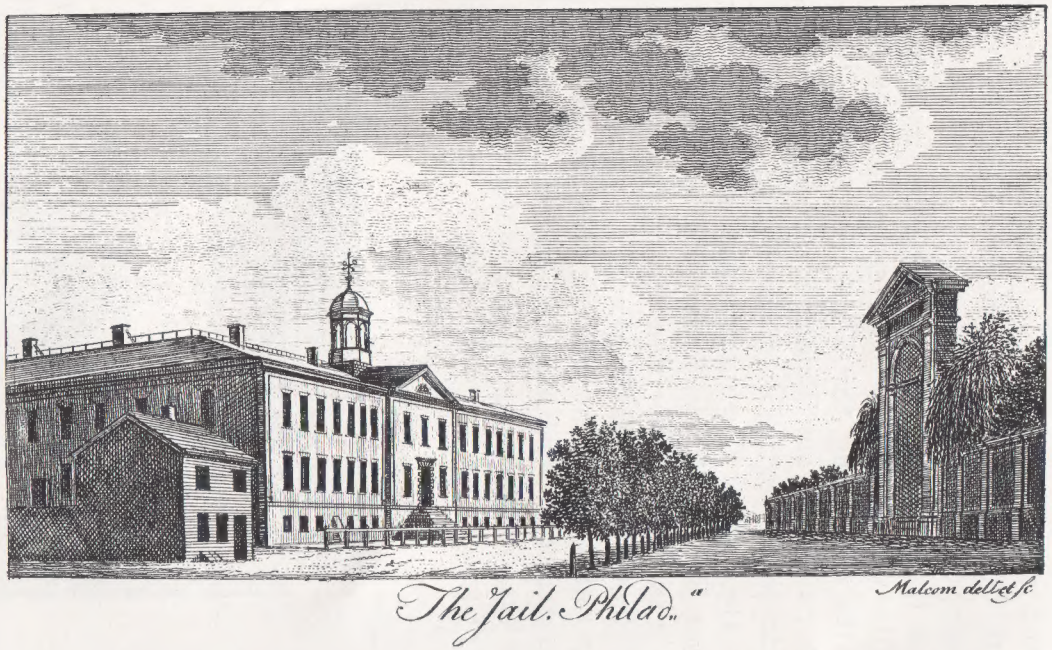
was used as a Potter's Field, particularly during the Revolution. Many American and British soldiers of the war are sleeping there in the six acres, two roods and three perches of Washington Square ground. Buried there were also many of the Acadians and many victims of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793.

In the memory of old inhabitants was the fact that just over the South border there was a pond notable for the shooting of wild ducks.

From the beginning of the Revolution until 1836 the Walnut Street Prison stood on the southeast corner of Sixth and Walnut Streets, its side along the Southeast Square, its grounds and buildings reaching from Walnut Street to Prune (Locust) Street with a debtor's apartment at the Prune Street end and walled off from the yard. The most noted inhabitant of the debtors' prison was Robert Morris, financier of the Revolution, who had lost out in speculation; his most distinguished visitor in the Prison was President George Washington.

A special issue of paper currency was printed in 1775 "According to an Act of General Assembly of Pennsylvania, passed in the fifteenth year of the reign of His Majesty George III" for the purpose of raising money with which to build the Prison. Each

The face of the paper money showing Walnut Street Prison.



The Walnut Street Prison, facing the Walnut Street Gate of the State House Yard.

note carried a picture of the Prison front, and in red ink below the picture were the words (upside down) "To counterfeit is Death."

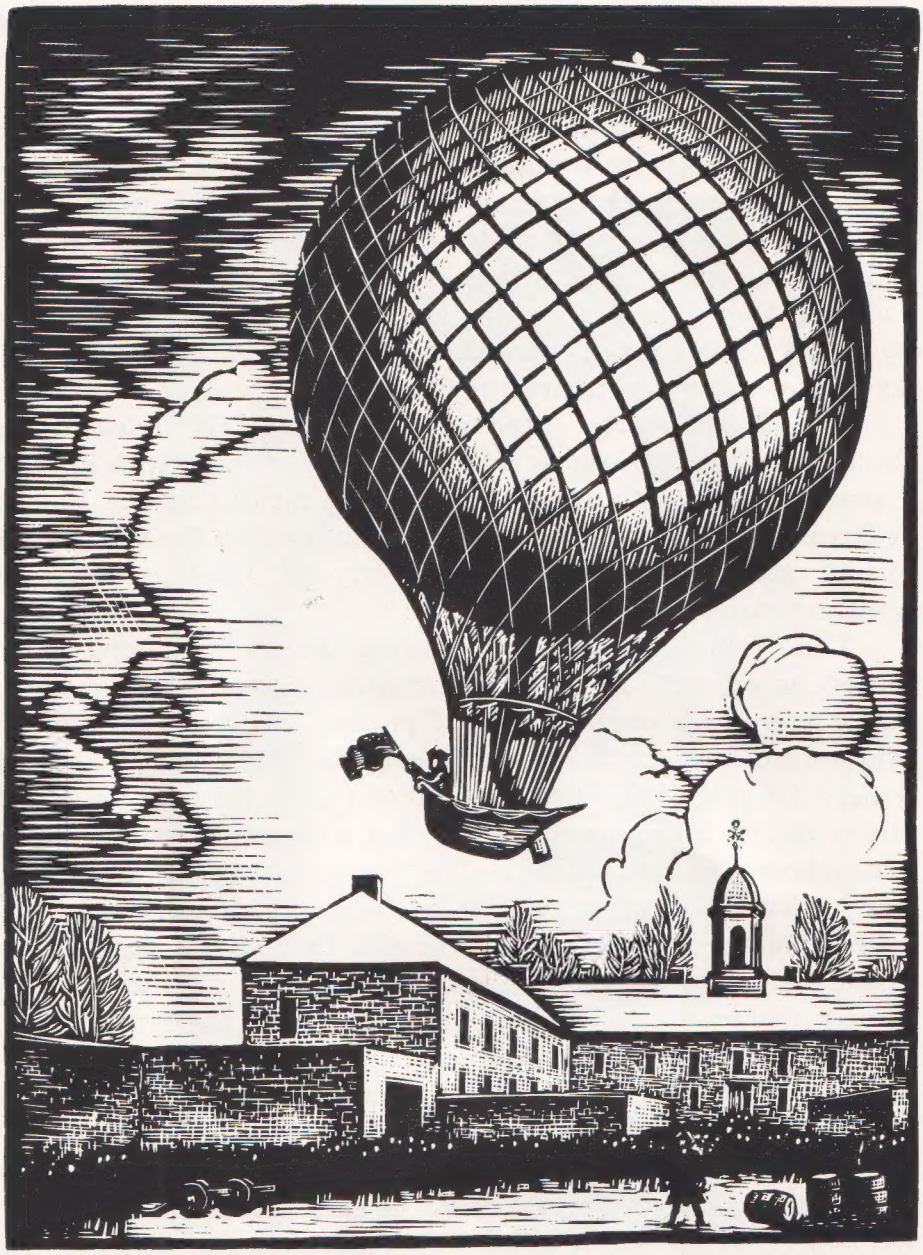
The Prison building was still incomplete when the Revolutionary authorities in the State House a block away made use of its storage space to keep gunpowder and other munitions. The first prisoners in the gaol included felons, debtors, prisoners of war, and Tories, one of whom was booked as having been caught "wishing that the Continental gunpowder wagons would blow up." Six of the first prisoners set a precedent, later much observed, by staging an escape the first night.

The British Army, entering the City in 1777, released the Tories and British prisoners, and made the gaol the British Provost Prison, filling it with American soldiers captured at the Battles of Germantown and Brandywine. The next year the tables were turned again, for the enemy left the city and Continental troops came in from Valley Forge.

The Walnut Street Prison, during the war and afterwards, earned notoriety. In 1778, its reputation was so unfavorable that a reform was started and the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Ministerium, and the Society of Friends founded The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, the oldest prison reform group in the world and still active today as The Pennsylvania Prison Society. The Society's work, in suggesting and instituting changes principally by installing workshops and honest management, was so successful that the Walnut Street Prison became a model gaol and its reputation such as to bring earnest visitors there from other cities to study the system.

During the Yellow Fever epidemic a number of the men prisoners voluntarily worked as nurses at the pest house, while the women prisoners gave up their bedding for hospital use.

It was from the yard of the Walnut Street Prison that there started the greatest sporting event of early American history on January 9, 1793—the first air voyage in America and the real beginning of aviation in the Western Hemisphere. Jean Pierre Blanchard, a citizen of France, ascended in a hydrogen-filled balloon in the presence of a great assembly, including President George Washington. The aeronaut carried a letter of introduction



The first air voyage in America, January 9, 1793. Woodcut by Charles R. Gardner.

from Washington. The balloon reached a maximum altitude of 5,813 feet, traveled a distance of 15 miles in 46 minutes, and landed in the countryside near Woodbury, New Jersey.

There were two reasons why the aeronaut was granted the use of the Prison yard for beginning his air voyage. His balloon had to be protected from "the molestations of a curious public" and he needed "a sum which might lighten the burthen of my expenses." The City Fathers gave him the use of the gaol yard "on account of its spaciousness" in a town with many trees. The Prison's high walls thus provided Philadelphia with its first stadium. The receipts were disappointing, for while the City's entire population witnessed the ascension, most of the spectators economically viewed it from outside the walls. Incidentally, the wagon gate of the gaol through which the balloon must have been brought in was in the Sixth Street wall along Washington Square, and the ascension was made from the open space in the yard not far from the wagon gate.

The annalist Watson says that about 1785 it was the custom for negroes "at the time of fairs and other great holidays to go there (to the Southeast Square) to the number of one thousand of both sexes and hold their dances, dancing after the manner of their several nations in Africa, and speaking and singing in their native dialects."

The Southeast Square's first city planning improvement was in 1802 when a Committee of City Councils recommended that a fence should be set on the West side of the Square five feet within the row of trees and that another row of trees should be planted there. In 1805 Councils directed that in order to complete the improvement side walls should be erected and that a cover of condemned logs should be placed over the little creek crossing it diagonally from Walnut to Sixth Street, the creek should be tunneled under the Prison, and thus go into Dock Creek. An arrangement was made to put in a flood gate at the mouth of the tunnel to collect water after a great rain, the water to be periodically released to clean out the tunnel.

At the same time the University of Pennsylvania was refused permission to erect a building on the Square for the use of the Medical School. And the next year there was an unsuccessful

The southwest corner of Washington Square about 1900, from the sketch by Frank H. Taylor

proposal that a public market house be built on the Square. And ten years later Councils ordered out the cattle market which was along Seventh Street and to its West.

The Southeast Square received a real city planning improvement in 1816 when the artist-engineer George Bridport laid out the ground and had it fenced in, and many trees were planted by Andrew Gillespie. The tree planting was extraordinarily successful and the Square became known far and wide for its arboretum. Many of those same trees are still standing, now grown to great size although some of them, becoming too crowded, had to be removed in 1880.

In 1831 the Horticultural Society of Pennsylvania described the Square as containing "50 varieties of trees, 7 of which are European and 43 native, 2 of which trees were introduced by Lewis & Clark from the Rocky Mountains. Hence instruction with respect to our productions is placed before the public, and at the same time it is ascertained what trees are best adapted to our immediate climate, salubrity is diffused throughout the neighborhood and to the City generally, and recreation afforded to the assiduous citizen where he may view 400 trees in the midst of a populous and busy city."

About 1822 the Square, as at present bounded, was laid out by order of Councils. The survey was made by William Rush, the first American sculptor and the man whose wood carving of ships' figureheads became famous on the seven seas.

The name of Washington Square was suggested in 1825 but was not adopted until 1833. The change was activated by excitement over the 1832 centennial of the birth of George Washington. And in '33 a cornerstone was laid in the center of the Square for a monument to the memory of Washington, although the monument never was erected there.

On Washington's birthday of 1833 there was a great procession to the Square to lay the cornerstone. In the parade were three troops of cavalry, five companies of artillery, ten companies of infantry. The wagon carrying the cornerstone prepared by the marble masons was followed by marble masons, hatters, agriculturalists, gardeners, tinplate workers, tobacconists, journeymen cabinetmakers, silverplate workers, cordwainers, saddlers and the

The Prune Street Theatre once on Locust Street just off Washington Square near Sixth Street, from a painting by Charles R. Gardner.

Youths Library and Literary Association. The stone was placed on a foundation in the center of the Square, covered over, and apparently it has remained ever since.

The name of Washington for the Square was very appropriate apart from his national popularity because Washington had spent considerable time, the greater part of his public life, in Philadelphia, having visited the city thirty-six times, his visits being anywhere from one day to eight months.

A monument to the fallen officers of the Washington Grays long stood in the center of the Square. Much later it was removed and placed fronting Seventh Street on the site where this command was mustered into service in 1861.

A high iron palisade fence was around the Square from 1838 until 1883. At another time there was a fence of white pales, and very early in its history the Square was surrounded by a privet hedge; says Watson, "where boys used to go and cut bow sticks for shooting of arrows."

There are many associations of Washington Square and music, beginning with the great heart song of America "Home, Sweet Home." It was first sung in this country at the Prune Street Theatre in 1823. The theatre was just off Washington Square on the South side of Prune, now Locust Street, between Fifth and Sixth. It was a converted warehouse and later on became the building of the Jefferson Medical College, ending up in a spectacular fire.

At 725 Walnut Street is a house bearing a bronze tablet, once the office of Lewis H. Redner, the man who wrote the music for Phillips Brooks' Christmas carol "O, Little Town of Bethlehem."

Sep Winner, Philadelphia composer, in 1855 heard a Negro of this neighborhood, Whistling Dick, imitating singing birds and Winner transcribed it as the song "Listen to the Mocking Bird" which was a great favorite of Abraham Lincoln's. It sold 20 million copies and is still popular—as is another song by Sep Winner, "Little Brown Jug."

About a century ago around Eighth and Chestnut, Philadelphia was the music publishing center of the country.

A block away from Washington Square, on Locust Street

A glimpse of the trees in Washington Square, looking southeast.

West of Eighth, stands Musical Fund Hall, built in 1824 by The Musical Fund Society. This was chartered in 1820 "for the relief of the distressed musicians and their families, and the cultivation of taste and proficiency of the musical art." The Hall is no longer used for music but once was famous for its acoustical qualities and for the musicians of note who appeared there, among them Ole Bull, Adelina Patti and Jenny Lind.

From 1822 until 1928 a famous church, The First Presbyterian, stood on Washington Square along Locust Street. Its congregation was founded in 1698. The Quakers had their Orange Street Meetinghouse on the Square on the site of the present building of the Farm Journal. The Pennsylvania Bible Society, at the corner of Seventh and Walnut, is the oldest in the country, founded in 1808, and is the Atlantic agency of the American Bible Society, publishing and distributing Bibles in over seventy languages.

Least quiet on a quiet Square is the fire company at Sixth and Locust. The bells and sirens of this fire company have long been famous in the neighborhood and its engine is the one nearest to respond to the famous fire alarm box in Independence Hall which is numbered 1776.

Today on Washington Square are many famous businesses, some of them very long established. The Square has long been Philadelphia's center for the publishing business. Facing the Square are the J. B. Lippincott Company, The Catholic Standard and Times, the W. B. Saunders Company, the Central News Company, the Farm Journal, and Lea & Febiger.

Lea & Febiger is a continuation of the business of Mathew Carey, founded in 1785, partly through a loan from the Marquis de Lafayette. It is the oldest book publishing company in the country and publishes a magazine over a century old—The American Journal of the Medical Sciences. One of Carey's agents, an itinerant bookseller, was Mason Locke Weems, who invented the legend of George Washington's cherry tree, a bit of folklore introduced into Parson Weems' own book, a rather imaginative life of Washington.

It seems scarcely necessary to tell of the reputation of these Washington Square publishing houses. The Farm Journal and

The Athenaeum on Sixth Street as it looked in 1854, from a wood engraving of that time.

the Country Gentleman are well known in rural districts everywhere. The Lippincott business was established in 1792 and has today a varied catalogue with a national reputation. Lea & Febiger's textbooks are also well known. The magazines of the Curtis Publishing Company—the Saturday Evening Post, the Ladies Home Journal, the Country Gentleman, Holiday—and the medical books of Saunders, have a world-wide fame.

Another Philadelphia "first" is the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society at Walnut Street and West Washington Square, founded in 1816 as a benevolent institution without stockholders.

On the Southeast corner of Sixth and Walnut stands the Home Office of The Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, which was organized in 1847.

At 219 S. Sixth Street is the building of Italian renaissance architecture erected in 1847 of the Athenaeum Library, organized in 1814 as a reading room, and continuing with a distinguished membership.

In an old house at 245 S. Sixth Street was the residence of Marshal de Grouchy, the man upon whose failure to carry out the spirit of his orders the Emperor Napoleon attributed his defeat at Waterloo. After Napoleon had lost out, the feeling against the Marshal was strong enough to cause him to leave France and come to Philadelphia.

For a long time Washington Square was a legal center. Brick buildings along the Square from Sixth to Seventh, and on Sixth Street from Walnut Street Southward, were known as Lawyer's Rows, being occupied as offices by attorneys who had to be convenient to the law courts of State House Row on Chestnut Street, a block away.

Space limitations make it impossible to tell the story of all the nationally known business organizations located on Washington Square. But the main office of N. W. Ayer & Son and the executive offices of Rohm and Haas Company are imposing structures which forecast the progress of Washington Square in the future.

The business neighbors of Washington Square formed an Improvement Association in 1915 to keep a paternal eye on the Square and to join together to put through improvements. One

Looking down and southwest on the Washington Square of today.

of the things the Association did was to plant a border of ginkgo trees all around the Square. And these noble trees have survived the rigors of a climate along four city streets. They may well attract attention, for to see a ginkgo tree in a way is almost like seeing a dinosaur for the tree is a curious survival of the age of the dinosaur, at least a million years ago. Some of the largest dinosaurs were herbiverous and probably fed upon the leaves of ginkgo trees growing in the land that eventually became these United States.

Time finished off the great reptiles, but the ginkgo trees remained, and then the glacial age came on and in its surge of ice swept clean our continent. But elsewhere the ginkgo survived, principally in China, and eventually about a mere 100 years ago admirers of the quaint tree began importing it into America, thus bringing it back to a land where a ginkgo tree is a species older than any other native growing thing. Some of them may be seen on the outer edges of Philadelphia's Washington Square, slim trees with odd fan-shaped leaves, with branches here and there shooting strangely off into some unexpected direction.

The silhouette of George Washington on the cover is reproduced from a silhouette made from the life by Nelly Custis. It was the filled-in tracing of his shadow cast on the wall of a room in Mount Vernon in 1798.